

# ‘Da ya think it’s sexy?’ Horace *Odes* 2.5

John Henderson

Reading a Latin poem is no simple enterprise; nor does an Ode’s meaning lie in a phrase or a paraphrase. It may take two, three, maybe many more readings, each increasingly immersed. Here, John Henderson takes us through a detailed reading of *Odes* 2.5 delivering a lesson not just in how to read this poem but in how to read Horace’s *Odes*, and indeed poetry more generally.

## It’s a cow’s life

Other translations are available. And so, so many ways to get into this poem, too. Here, though (always), Horace is the poet for reckoning the matter of moments in lives. Take cattle.

*Nondum subacta ferre iugum ualeat  
ceruice, nondum munia comparis  
aequare nec tauri ruentis  
in uenerem tolerare pondus.*

*Not strong yet to carry a yoke on the neck  
put underneath, nor yet to match up with a  
partner’s stint, nor take a bull’s toppling  
into sex, accommodating all that weight. (Ode 2.5.1–4)*

Another July and bovine lives head for the big divide. Train them young to the yoke; choose suited pairs; turn two-year-old heifers in with the bull to breed. Horace wrote this Ode in the Alcaic metre: each stanza contains two hendecasyllables (eleven-syllable lines), followed by a third nine-syllable line, and a fourth in ten syllables – predominantly dactylic (or a long-short-short, *tum-ti-ti* rhythm). Here, two equally paired opening lines tip in the Alcaic’s pivotal third verse as the bull crashes down into the calf, with as much weight as the dactylic roll of the fourth line of the stanza can handle.

It is not likely that a heifer could serve as both a breeding cow and draught animal; that is, one which pairs up with another beast to draw loads or to plough. Rather, the poem gets us to pick over the times each year for sorting the herd: some bullocks are castrated to make strong oxen and then paired for draught and plough, while the rest – except the less than 1% who might make a breeding bull – are sent for slaughter; in the meantime, cows are chosen for reproduction and milk. In all of this, it is a farmer’s expertise in sex and gender difference that sorts domesticated nature for function ...

Seen this fantastical way, *men* force *women* into subjection to work their hardest; they expect them to match male power side by side in ‘conjugal’ity’, when really sex is a dangerous tonnage of one-way wham-bam: one bull kept whole to cover a hundred or more females. Yet, *cows* do have minds; they learn their names and work out how to deal with drivers given half a chance. It is a precisely hapless mismatch of size, neck muscle strength, and pulling bulk to team them with castrated oxen (leave bulls out of

it!; *compar*, line 2, is common gender, and the feminine subject holds back for the next stanza before retroacting, in lines 5–6).

## Girls just wanna have fun

*circa uirentis est animus tuae  
campos iuuencae, nunc fluuiis grauem  
solantis aestum, nunc in udo  
ludere cum uitulis salicto*

*Round green grasslands on the range are your heifer’s  
thoughts, now with a river or so she’s easing  
the crushing heat, now in some sodden  
willow copse it’s fun and games with the calves (5–8)*

Yet the poem’s farmer knows a heifer grows to have fancies, wants to go out and roam, cool the flushes of summer, splash in the shade and play with the calves. She’s stirring already, stirred through a stanza before she even gets to stir (as we shall see, *prae-gestientis*, ‘randing for’, in line 9). At these three thoughts, blurring this, then that, then the other, into the split simultaneity of a range of possibilities. She’s not to bother whether the herd is calves – common gender – or heifers or both (*uitulis*, line 8); this is instinct. ‘Hotting up now’ (*aestum nunc*) is the second stanza’s pivot. Nature – it is pushed on ‘us’ – does not know the score, where she’s headed. Before –

## The Autumn Bo-Vine

*prae-gestientis. tolle cupidinem  
immitis uuae: iam tibi liuidos  
distinguet autumnus racemos  
purpureo uarius colore.*

*she’s randing for already. Kick out the urge  
for a bunch still not sweet: soon for you grapes of  
black’n’blue autumn will differentiate,  
technicolourist with the pigment red. (9–12)*

...she gets there, but even as we do too, the picture has changed. That is, once translated into human terms, the opening splash of sex. Bullied Body giving way to Innocent Mind, is marked as a macho, sexist, business and, instead, it is replaced with an acceptable face of desire. We switch to that other ‘farm’, a twin metaphor for the cowshed: *the vineyard*.

Make wine, not beef, and ‘your’ vine will sweeten up reproduction into a rhetorical treat for the eye, as nature turns through summer into the fall (*autumnus* in line 11 is the third pivot). Putting a finesse on the heave and despotism of bovine sex, autumn paints; it paints each individual baby ‘calf’ its own individual ‘choice’ red-blue-black of hue (*dis-tinguet*, line 11). Selling deferred desire with aesthetic pleasure now, and sweet wine to come. Nice – but err erotically challenged. This patch over verboten lust left the erotically charged next step for ‘you’ and (y)our heifer cancelled, beyond the pale – but necessarily-naturally on the point of happening, and, wait for it, the tantalizing

effect has somewhere, somewhere else, to shift. Grapes back into heifer.

### Happy heifer after?

*iam te sequetur; currit enim ferox  
aetas et illi quos tibi dempserit  
apponet annos; iam proterua  
fronte petet Lalage maritum,*

*Soon she'll be chasing you – see, there's no taming  
the lifecycle pace, what it subtracts from you  
it'll add to her in years – soon rutting  
butting Lalage will go for a mate, (13–16)*

Now she did get there, while we diverted to watching out for autumn to paint the grape herd. All in the same variegated instant, she got here already, became her own agent now (*iam tibi...*, *iam te...*, *iam...*, lines 10, 13, 15). Under rhetorical vineleaf cover, she makes a move, does her thing.

A cow does want that servicing of her own free will, she will close on an uncooperative bull..., and who needs telling that faced with a herd of possible males for mates she'll run through the field, too? In our split second, you're a spectator still, but instead of sizing up, you're moved off centre-stage to appreciate what's served up (*iam tibi*, line 10), displaced by her coming for you (*iam te*, line 13); and before anyone can try this out to see if it works for them, see what the crunch will look or feel like now that the hoof's on the other foot. The poem shrinks the take, and hands out instead timeless timefree truism on the logic of the life-cycle – anyone's, that is, measured in terms not of moments, or seasons, but of whole years (*annos, iam*, line 15, the 4th pivot).

### Foot loose and fancy-free

*dilecta, quantum non Pholoe fugax,  
non Chloris albo sic umero nitens  
ut pura nocturno renidet  
luna mari Cnidiusue Gyges,*

*beloved as can't catch me Pholoë was not,  
nor Chloris, her shoulder gleaming white just like  
a spotless moon on a night-time's sea  
shimmering light, nor Gyges from Cnidus, (16–20)*

Horace interrupts.

At speed, wild thing.

The twist is that she's at the starting line where the forty-something Horace's countdown begins. That initial unequal incommensurability won't iron out.

Cow doesn't catch this bull, can never catch up. Such is life, mid-life.

No matter how previous heifer gets, out front and forward, all-out ahead of herself, 'Babbles' Lalage will go for a mate, but you, she left you behind, out of the picture, in that infinitesimal time-out break for a homily on lifetime's untrainable velocity. This maid gets a-mating, she doesn't stop (conjugals or not: *maritum*, line 16, in Latin goes either way). Stop at one mate, no longer tied to, or even including, 'you'.

Or to one mate at a time ...

She's special, she will be and is already the 'chosen one', beloved (*dilecta*, line 17). Or: she was. Your choice, Horace's, ours, ... everyone's (and no one's). Too much: and that's it.

Time leaves space, for what she outdoes. A string of beloveds. The temptation tease of promiscuity <=> the three-in-one best beloved – but as we sing along, three for one – *three* distinct, individualized, superimposed turn-ons, not one a patch on Her, not till they arrive and...

... steal the show. Runaway *Pholoe* the tantalizer. Your starter for ten. Then her pair in the matching first half-stanza *Chloris*, the glimmering off-the-shoulder beauty who gets her own special FX simile extension of limelight: shining spotless to dazzle an

ocean full of admirers all through the night (*nocturno*, line 19, the 5th pivot). A queen among cows, hold that goddess pose (not in the marsh, line 7, but over the deep, line 20). Leaving number three comparandum, non pareil: Gyges. Who slows the tempo down some more, held just beyond where he'd get real. It's a boy from Aphrodite's temple island, named for basic instinct 'netting'. Fit him in.

This last variation on A Love To Beat All leaves rutting and butting nature, brute hulking strength, to deliver instead a proposition about GENDER.

### Who's that guy Gyges?

*quem si puellarum insereres choro,  
mire sagacis falleret hospites  
discrimen obscurum solutis  
crinibus ambiguoque uultu.*

*who, if you stuck him in a girls' chorus line  
would magically fool visiting experts  
for his eclipse of the difference,  
by locks let loose, by a can't tell which face. (21–4)*

This time imagine an organized herd of girls.

Synchronized singing and dancing for their community, the spotless and sound future brides. And here, a third column infiltrates (*in-sereres*, line 21, not *in uenerem*, line 4), but nobody can tell who doesn't know these local calves individually.

It's not the boy Gyges as such, no, it's the blanking-out of distinctive markers to differentiate from the budding females this immature male in the making's undecidable coiffure and epicene face. That's what trailers him as the quintessentially unseizable extra (*obscurum*, line 23, the final pivot).

He's the human farmyard's missing ingredient, the question mark of cisgender ambivalence: no more to be set either this side or that of the binary male-female parting of the ways than the discerning free play that blurs the 'parting' (*discrimen*, line 23) in the free-style long hair which will be shorn when this bullock, you could imagine, maybe comes of age, whether as meat on legs, neutered working ox, nominee for bull, ultimately time-expiring ex-stud, what are the odds?

Attractiveness that lasts the toy boy no time at all isn't here to trump the heifer, but to make us stop and gawp, to know it would be more fun to cheat the eye (*falleret*, line 22), and not to have the faintest. On behalf of both, to amplify, recommend, and (fail to) glimpse the recessive sexiness of *that*.

Could you get Horace to rustle up those rhythmic gymnast girls, extra man included, to give *Odes* 2.5 a whirl? Hoof it for all they're worth? We can sing, too, about tra-la-Lalage, and listen, maybe learn (to love) some of how the magic words work: it was *tuae* (5) that sparks the sequence in the first place: if you're the owner, you own her – yours to programme and yours for the taking, *and* (how?) yours for a twosome team mate?

What in that case is 'yours'? Once acknowledged as Thinking => Desiring => Wired to head into sex => On your tail => Homing on a mate ..., she'll be ... best beloved all right. The mostest.

But 'yours' – what's that? *That* you recedes, eclipsed by the one that plays at switching the calves around (*puellarum insereres choro*, line 21 ~ *ludere cum uitulis*, line 8). The sexy you the lyric conjures up.

*John Henderson is Emeritus Professor of Classics and Fellow of King's College. He is the author of all too many books on Latin Literature.*